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“Stakeholder Perspectives on Addressing Migration Push Factors”
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The topic of today’s hearing – addressing migration push factors – is of vital importance as the United States once again finds itself grappling with an increased number of migrants seeking entry between ports along the U.S.-Mexico border.

As is implicit in today’s topic, effective migration policy that serves core U.S. national interests neither begins nor ends at our nation’s physical borders. The reason for that is simple as the border is just one point in a complex migratory system that stretches thousands of miles in both direction from the line of demarcation between the United States and Mexico set by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848.

Yet for the past 30 years, not just the past four years, the United States has gotten migration policy wrong in no small part because we have thought we could address migration exclusively at the U.S. border and that we could enforce our way out of any challenge. We cannot, at least not in a sustainable manner that is consistent with our laws and our values.

To stand up a safe, orderly, and humane migration system work certainly needs to be done at the border but also on both sides thereof. Work that must be in service of a coherent strategy that guides an interlocking set of domestic, border, and international policies to bring order to migration in the Americas.

We must, for example, restore the rule of law and values to our immigration system, enact changes to detention, enforcement, and deportation policies and practices as well as address the status of DACA and TPS recipients and undocumented “essential workers” as President Biden has proposed doing in the Citizenship Act legislation currently pending before Congress.

To promote order in migratory flows and restore U.S. humanitarian and human rights leadership, we must also reform migrant processing and protection mechanisms at the U.S.-Mexico border; ensure vulnerable individuals who urgently need protection are afforded access thereto as close to home as possible; and create and expand legal work pathways to restore circularity to migration.

We must also work on the topic of today’s hearing – migration push factors -- to help create conditions so individuals and families throughout northern Central America can safely exercise their right to live out their lives in their communities and countries of origin as so many clearly wish to do.

Understanding the Push Factors

As members of this Subcommittee and other policymakers look to build a sustained, integrated approach to migration in the Americas and as you look to address migration push factors it is vital to have a sophisticated understanding of what leads people to migrate to the United States in the first place.

Individuals from northern Central America are on move today for myriad reasons, including poverty and lack of economic opportunity, violence and insecurity, weak governance, corruption, natural disasters, and a desire for family reunification. Any effective migration management system must, at least, begin to address each of those reasons.

But before delving into how, it is important to realize that many of those “push factors” or “root causes,” like migration itself, are symptoms of a deeper challenge. The uncomfortable truth is that the economies and societies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are, in effect, designed to fail broad swaths of their populations in service of the region’s economic and political elites. Far too many people across the region are treated, in essence, as export commodities by the powers that be. Unless and until we confront that reality head-on, we will simply lurch from crisis to crisis.

Being clear eyed about the role of these entrenched, corrupt power structures is critical to any successful U.S. policy approach that will require a level of intrusiveness – on behalf of good governance and market economics -- that may be uncomfortable but is necessary to instill hope among the people of northern Central America and to empower change agents inside and outside of governments throughout the region.

Effectively addressing push factors also requires differentiating between kinds of push factors as that differentiation helps think about the most effective policy tools the U.S. government has at its disposal to address them. Fundamentally there are two kinds of push factors – acute causes and root causes. And the U.S. policy tool kit for each is quite distinct.

Addressing the Acute Causes of Migration

The most acute reasons forcing individuals to flee northern Central America today are the still devastating effects of Hurricanes Eta and Iota -- two “once-a-century storms” that made landfall 15 miles and two weeks apart in November 2020 – and the impact of COVID 19.

Eta and Iota adversely affected more than 11 million people across a region already reeling from the economic impacts of the pandemic. The storms displaced nearly 1 million people, many of whom have still not been able to return home and devastated crops across the region.

The initial U.S. response to the hurricanes was, at best, anemic with the Trump Administration making available \$42 million in disaster relief, only \$21 million of which was utilized. In comparison, in response to Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the administration

of then-President Bill Clinton, working together with a Republican-led Congress, provided nearly \$1 billion in disaster relief and reconstruction funding.

Although the Biden Administration has taken steps to significantly increase the disaster response, with Vice President Harris announcing nearly \$200 million in new humanitarian assistance for the region in late April 2021 (USAID), the United Nations has warned that 5.5 million people across the region are in urgent need of food assistance out of a total of 10 million who are in need of humanitarian assistance in general. Working together with the U.S. Congress, the Biden Administration can and should do more, in particular, to head off the acute food crisis already unfolding across the region's rural sector.

Meeting the needs of those suffering from the impacts of Eta and Iota also means helping address both the need for community-level reconstruction and the need for immediate employment opportunities. Fast disbursing, cash-based programs can and should be stood up to do just that.

It is vital U.S. policy recognize that the people of Central America have agency; that the vast majority desperately want to build better societies for themselves and their families. We should be seeking to leverage that agency in every way possible to help them achieve that desire.

The U.S. government also has perhaps an unparalleled opportunity to address the other acute cause of migration – the on-going devastating effects of COVID-19 on the countries of northern Central America. In the past 14 months, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have experienced at least 15,000 deaths from COVID-19. They have also seen their economies contract by -8.6, -1.5, and -8.0 percent (IMF) respectively. And they are expected to bounce back less quickly than most other parts of the Americas with projected economic growth in 2021 coming in at a 4.2-4.5 percent (IMF).

Although these countries need international support to address these realities, what they need most acutely – especially Guatemala (0.01 percent vaccinated) and Honduras (0.03 percent vaccinated) – are vaccines. The United States, of course, has an increasing supply of highly effective, U.S.-manufactured COVID-19 vaccines. As the Biden Administration begins to share vaccines broadly around the world, it should ensure that it focus first on the countries that constitute our “near abroad,” that is the countries of Central America and the Caribbean.

Doing so is not just about being a good neighbor, it is about being a smart neighbor who understands that what happens in these countries is, in effect, happening in the United States given the deep interconnection we share with our geographically closest neighbors.

There is another cause of migration that is both acute and root that the Biden Administration and Congress can and should address – corruption.

To understand why and how, consider the following: When a migrant caravan formed on January 15, 2021 in San Pedro Sula, Honduras and its members set out on their journey many did so chanting “Fuera, Juan Orlando, Fuera!” or “Out, Juan Orlando, Out!” directed at Honduras’ notoriously corrupt president Juan Orlando Hernandez, a man has been repeatedly identified by U.S. federal prosecutors as an unindicted co-conspirator in the successful drug prosecutions of his brother.

For many in Honduras today, migration is, at least in part, an act of political protest. A clean break with Hernandez – by, at a bare minimum, publicly sanctioning him – would send an unmistakable signal that the U.S. approach this time is different. Sanctioning a sitting president – a step that has only been used on very few occasions – is not something to be done lightly, but it would make clear that the United States is standing with the people of Central America and not the corrupt keepers of the region’s failed status quo. That in turn could affect the decisional criteria of potential migrants in Honduras who may see in that disruption the beginnings of a better future.

Addressing the Root Causes of Migration

Addressing the root cause of migration requires disrupting the status quo across northern Central America in multiple ways. Such disruption is not just, or even primarily, a question of U.S. assistance resources and conditionality. Rather it is a question of the Biden Administration and those that will follow it, consistent with demands from the U.S. Congress, being willing to use the U.S.’s outsized political influence to openly confront those who stand in the way of structural reform and to back and foster champions of change--inside and outside of government--across northern Central America.

As part of these efforts, the U.S. government must aim to alter its partner of choice in working on the root causes of migration. It must, together with partners from across the international community, also focus its efforts in new ways, beginning by placing a premium on bolstering good governance. Finally, it must seek to alter – through sticks and carrots – the incentives of elites across the region.

Partners of Choice. In words and actions, the U.S. government must openly embrace and empower local civil society across the region as its partners of choice and treat the governments of the region as limited partners almost certain to disappoint over time until they prove otherwise. This embrace must be manifest not only in the symbolic, but also in the programmatic. Local civil society organizations should be seen as a wellspring of ideas on how to positively enhance conditions on the ground and promote rootedness among the people of northern Central America, as well as implementing partners.

When it comes to the treatment of its partners, the United States must also make clear that those – in civil society and in government – who stand up in the anti-corruption fight will find protection in the United States if, and when, they and their families need it. Recent history has seen too many instances of the U.S. government turning its back on these champions. That must never be allowed to be repeated.

Another, potential disruptive U.S. partner could be large U.S. companies with a significant on-the-ground presence across the region. These companies, governed by the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and every day implored by their investors, employees, and customers to account for the interests of a greater number of stakeholders, have a vested interest in improving the business and societal environment in northern Central America. Together with reform-minded entrepreneurs who wish to disrupt the stranglehold on competition held by a small number of actors in these countries, large U.S. companies can help advance reforms in the seemingly mundane, yet critical, areas of electronic invoicing, mandatory tax withholding, and similar practical reforms.

Such reforms improve the business environment for U.S. companies, disrupt the stasis holding back competition, and help build governing institutions across the region. Similarly, large multinational companies can be change agents by promoting local philanthropy across northern Central America to reduce the reliance on large foreign donors.

Changing Emphasis. In the past, U.S. assistance to the countries of northern Central America has either ignored governance, put it in a back seat, or, at best, sought to advance it simultaneous to efforts to address prosperity and security. When it comes to expending U.S. taxpayer dollars to effectively address root causes of migration the lessons of the recent past are clear – every effort should be made to put governance first.

A governance first approach to assistance in northern Central America should include:

- **Renewing or strengthening anti-corruption bodies.** Multilateral support missions for anticorruption efforts in Guatemala and Honduras proved so effective in recent years that corrupt elements in each country – with the Trump Administration’s quiet acquiescence – successfully pushed back and ended those missions. Going forward, every effort should be made to reestablish anticorruption and transparency mechanisms both at a national and regional level.
- **Deploying Multilateral Support Mechanisms for Tax, Customs, and Procurement Authorities.** Much like international investigators and prosecutors worked side-by-side to build and prosecute cases with Central American counterparts through multilateral-backed anti-corruption mechanisms, international experts should be systematically deployed to work side-by-side with tax, customs, and procurement officials across northern Central America to further root out corruption where it is most corrosive.
- **Embedding advisors to bolster key ministries.** U.S. civilian experts and/or experienced partner-nation personnel should be embedded in government agencies across northern Central America, including ministries of defense, *Ministerios Públicos*, and across the judicial sector in a systematic way to bolster professionalism and political will.

- **Promoting robust Inspector Generals throughout civil administration.** Condition whatever limited U.S. assistance that passes through governments of the countries of northern Central America on a proliferation of IGs inside key ministries with autonomy and investigative capacity to safeguard accountability, respect for the rule of law, and anti-corruption.

As we begin to experience more direct migration from the region's rural sectors, stabilizing those regions should be given greater priority than has been the case before. Efforts should focus on stimulating economic growth by enhancing the finance and market access possibilities open to small farmers. Such steps should include:

- **Expanding access to weather-based crop insurance** by encouraging Central American government agencies and the private banking sector to partner to provide large-scale, low-premium, weather-based crop insurance to smallholder farmers.
- **Creating a jointly financed, public-private commercializing entity,** supported by the US International Development Finance Corporation, to provide a phased-out-over-time price guarantee to farmers and cooperatives who make the transition to specialty or hybrid coffee plants, vegetables, or other non-traditional crops to empower these farmers to compete against existing cartels.
- **Developing innovative financing for small farmers in rural areas,** by working with partner governments, banking sectors and fintech to create credit guarantees, risk-sharing facilities, mobile banking, and joint credit product design for small and medium farmers.
- **Prioritizing rural infrastructure investment** that benefits all forms of economic development, including roads (not just highways but secondary and tertiary roads), water purification plants, waste management, renewable energy sources like wind and water, and investments in the coffee value chain.

A change in focus is also necessary when it comes to addressing security throughout the region. It is vital that the U.S. government expand measures/definitions of "insecurity" to better formulate U.S. policy responses and messaging. U.S. policy and policymakers have focused too much on homicide rates as the definitive measure of insecurity. Other crimes--particularly extortion and gender-based/domestic violence--need to be more effectively tracked and factored into policy responses to insecurity as homicide rates alone do not appear to significantly affect perceptions of insecurity.

In the short-term, the U.S. must also surge resources and capabilities to school and family-based programs for at-risk youth in communities most likely to be tipped toward remaining in their home countries. To show results as quickly as possible and thus affect public perceptions of hope, a surge of resources should focus on communities and programs that have shown results in the past. Crucially, to move the needle on migration mitigation, efforts should not be concentrated initially in communities where

gang activities are most prevalent, though long-term progress will very much depend on addressing these besieged areas. Instead, efforts should be focused on migrant-sending communities where conditions are closest to being safe for residents to choose to stay. Past efforts by U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department's Bureau of International Law Enforcement (INL) to integrate prevention and law enforcement programs at the community level fell short and must be significantly enhanced. Making "place-based" more than a slogan needs to be a priority task for each U.S. ambassador in northern Central America and performance-assessment criteria for USAID and INL personnel.

Alter Elite Incentives. The deep interconnection between the countries of northern Central America and the United States provides the U.S. government with considerable leverage when it comes to altering behavior in those countries. In short, access – physical, financial, and commercial – to the United States is a privilege. It should be treated as such and denied to those who actively undermine U.S. interests in northern Central America.

To that end, the U.S. government should not be shy in using its diplomatic and political leverage to condition and coerce political and economic elites to implement intrusive and far-reaching reforms that both foster space for free-market competition and provide sufficient social safety nets to protect the most vulnerable. This means naming and shaming individuals who seek to subvert reform efforts; sanctioning those who are engaged in corruption, subversion of democratic norms, and human rights abuses; and being public about a willingness to seek extradition in high-profile corruption cases with sufficient nexus to the United States.

To channel the interest of those members of the private sector who seek to be part of the solution in northern Central America and to expand the resources available to scale effective programs, the U.S. government should work with governments across the region to create a Northern Triangle Public-Private Partnership Enterprise Fund. Such a \$500M enterprise fund could be funded through the purchase of zero-interest government bonds by individuals from across the region. The Enterprise Fund could then back public-private partnership projects carefully designed to promote competition rather than to harden existing economic disparities and structures.

Conclusion

The challenge of mitigating and managing migration from northern Central America and relieving pressure on the U.S.-Mexico border is real. But it is not insurmountable.

An integrated strategy that advances simultaneously at home, at the border, and in the region can usher in an era of safe, orderly, and humane migration management that advances core U.S. national interests. In the region, that requires addressing the reasons people are on the move today; creating legal avenues for migration; and intentionally disrupting the failed status across the region in such a way to give hope and opportunity for those countless Central Americans who simply want to exercise the right not have to migrate.